

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP | NHA-TL-002

The Burning Building Principle

What genuinely dysfunctional environments reveal about commercial leadership

THE THESIS

Most senior commercial leaders spend their careers in organisations that more or less function. Systems work, budgets exist, management structures operate. The conditions that make sales and business development possible are simply assumed. They should not be. The most important commercial lessons are learned in the places where none of those conditions exist.

"The worst environments produce the clearest thinking. When nothing works, you discover very quickly what commercial leadership actually requires, and what was simply comfortable habit."

PART ONE — WHAT A BURNING BUILDING LOOKS LIKE

A burning building in commercial terms is not simply a difficult employer or a challenging market. It is a specific set of conditions, each individually manageable, collectively capable of making normal commercial activity functionally impossible. The defining characteristics are consistent across sectors and company types:

- No coherent management structure. Decisions are made reactively, by whoever has authority in the room at the moment.
- Financial controls that manage appearances rather than performance. Month-to-month gap-filling replaces planning.
- Clients who are already leaving or thinking about it. Service delivery has deteriorated. Commitments made during the sales process have not been honoured.
- A leadership culture of blame avoidance. Board meetings exist to establish who is not responsible for the current situation.
- Unreasonable demands with no structural support to meet them. The pressure is constant. The resources are absent.

PART TWO — WHAT IT FORCES YOU TO LEARN

Lesson One: Trust Cannot Be Purchased with Promises

The instinct in a client recovery situation is to over-promise. Clients who have been let down are not irrational. Their scepticism has been earned by exactly the behaviour the new commercial leader is tempted to repeat. The only path back is specificity and consistency: precise undertakings about what will change, by when, delivered without exception.

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Lesson Two: BD at Two Speeds Simultaneously

In a burning building, the commercial leader is required to operate at two entirely different speeds at the same time. Client recovery is immediate, intensive, and backward-looking. New commercial development is strategic, patient, and

forward-looking. Most BD frameworks assume these activities can be separated, prioritised, and sequenced. A burning building removes that luxury.

Survival-mode account management and strategic opportunity development are not alternative activities. In the conditions where commercial leadership matters most, they are simultaneous requirements.

Lesson Three: Separate What You Can Control from What You Cannot

A burning building contains an enormous quantity of things that are genuinely beyond the commercial leader's control. The temptation is to engage with all of it. Attempting to fix the organisation while simultaneously serving the client produces a predictable outcome: failure at both.

The commercial leader who has learned to separate what they can control from what they cannot, in conditions where the distinction matters enormously, carries that clarity into every subsequent environment.

Lesson Four: The Ethics of Commercial Leadership Are Not Conditional

Every commercial leader faces moments where they are asked to do something that is wrong. In a burning building, the dynamics are different. The pressure is higher. The institutional support is absent. A commercial leader who has navigated that test knows something about themselves that most leaders do not.

PART THREE — WHY THESE LESSONS ARE COMMERCIALLY TRANSFERABLE

The principles extracted from a burning building are not context-specific. They are the principles of commercial leadership itself, made visible by the conditions that stripped away everything else. The commercial leader who has made these choices under genuine pressure does not choose them differently when conditions become easier. The choices have become reflex.

THE TRANSFER

The skills developed in a burning building are not specialised crisis management techniques. They are the fundamentals of commercial leadership, tested to failure point. Applied in stable conditions, they produce results that look disproportionate to the environment.

PART FOUR — THE REFLECTION THAT CHANGES THE PRACTICE

Several principles that define NHA's advisory practice were sharpened in exactly these conditions. Not developed from theory. Not adapted from a management framework. Forced into clarity by the requirement to produce commercial results in an environment that offered no structural support.

- Clients who have been let down need to see evidence, not hear promises.
- Financial chaos and ethical failure are rarely separate problems. In genuinely dysfunctional organisations, one reliably produces the other.
- The most important question in any commercial environment is not what is possible in ideal conditions, but what is possible in the conditions that actually exist.
- There are instructions that should not be followed. Career risk is a real consideration. It is not a sufficient one.

PART FIVE — THE NHA RELEVANCE

NHA does not work with organisations that are in crisis. The target client is a mid-market business, operating reasonably well, that has a commercial ceiling it cannot seem to break through, a client base that is not growing at the rate it should be, or an EBITDA that is not reflecting the revenue the business is generating. The relevance of the burning building is not in the circumstances it describes. It is in the quality of commercial thinking it produces.

THE NHA PROPOSITION

NHA advises a small number of retained mid-market clients on commercial strategy, revenue growth, and EBITDA improvement. One client per sector per geography. Single fee. No commissions. Personal delivery by Paul Foster. If the commercial challenge you are facing requires the quality of thinking this paper describes, a conversation costs nothing.

ABOUT NATHAN HARMER ASSOCIATES LTD

Our principal, Paul Foster, brings 49 years of commercial leadership including FTSE-level strategic account management, international BD programme design, and senior advisory across eight sectors.

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Our principal, Paul Foster, brings 49 years of commercial leadership. NHA operates on a strict one-client-per-sector-per-geography model and accepts no commissions or referral fees from any third party.

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